

The View from Florida-Ville

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What happens when every city in America craves the "creative class?"

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In 2002, a then-obscure academic named Richard Florida published *The Rise of the Creative Class*, which argued that knowledge workers were attracted to cities that offered the rare combination of "technology, talent, and tolerance," and that high-paying jobs and economic vitality were following them to these hubs of creativity.

The book became an unlikely best-seller, turning Florida into the world's most renowned professor of regional economic development. He has since penned a follow-up, *The Flight of the Creative Class*--which posits that the United States stands to lose global talent to countries that are more open and inclusive--and he's now working on a third book about how people choose where they live.

But nearly five years later, it's still Florida's original conceit that has legs. Everywhere you look, cities big and small are trying to get in touch with their inner Austin. Consider what's brewing in Fresno, California, where city leaders have hired a film commissioner and are considering an independent film festival: Directors would arrive on a Monday, be handed a video camera, and have six days to make their movie. Even more ambitious might be Aberdeen, South Dakota, a small city of 24,658 that sits 200 miles north of Sioux Falls. Aberdeen is contemplating (among other ideas) an international extreme-sports competition to draw attention to its prime snowmobiling location. It has created a slick Web portal showcasing cultural and recreational happenings and dangled a \$5,000 prize for residents who lure family members back home. "We're just trying to tighten our game plan," says Trishna Batra, executive director for Absolutely Aberdeen, the group heading up the town's foray into the global talent war.

In fact, the escalating race to attract a creative class has birthed a cottage industry of consultants charging six-figure sums to assess a city's potential. Those would include Florida himself, whose consulting firm, Catalytix, has done work in Tampa, Montreal, and Syracuse, among others. "The [pursuit of the] creative class has become a cliché of contemporary urban regeneration," says Jamie Peck, a professor of geography and sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Peck argues that this pursuit is tailor-made for cities on tight budgets that can afford only modest efforts at image building--and doomed to modest results, or worse. Indeed, there's scant evidence that Florida-esque creativity strategies have moved the needle on traditional economic-development gauges such as job and income growth. Michigan's Cool Cities program, which hands out \$100,000 grants to neighborhoods and towns to make improvements such as converting old buildings into lofts or art studios, has averaged a positive press mention every other day since launching in 2003. But so far, Michigan can't show any direct impact on economic activity.

That hasn't stopped cities from chasing the creative class as if it were a high-stakes, zero-sum game. Florida says this is a misreading of his research, and that cities can't get ahead simply with me-too approaches aimed at poaching creatives from other burgs. "These trends in the migration of highly skilled people are powerful," he says. "Public policy tools aren't going to alter them."

The bigger problem with pursuing creativity strategies might be their potential to overshadow a city's more basic social, educational, and infrastructural needs. In Fresno, which the Brookings Institution says has the highest concentration of residents living in extreme poverty among the nation's largest cities, the city's summary report on attracting and retaining knowledge workers had the unfortunate title "Making the Grass Greener."

Yet despite his critics, Florida doesn't seem to have lost his rock-star appeal. "It has just been this amazingly exciting opportunity for us to work with a pioneer," gushes Joyce Wilson, city manager of El Paso, Texas, which brought Florida in for a two-day workshop in September. El Paso has considered commissioning a giant piece of public art by the artist Christo for the border it shares with Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. What's next? Designated lanes for Segway scooter traffic? No one can fault cities for trying to be more livable. The question is whether doing so will make them more prosperous--or just more "hip."



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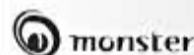
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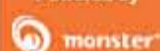
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